

Election genre of television journalism

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Television debates represent a peculiar genre of journalism – particularly in the period of election campaign when organizing a TV debate in this country itself is an element of campaigning. Hence, the TV debates can be considered an election genre.

As practice of a number of democracies shows, television debates have a substantial impact on voters' preferences and are seen as probably the most effective way of political campaigning. A classical example is the «Great Debates» of 1960 in the USA between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Kennedy was more convincing, and the debates brought him the victory that few had predicted. There is an opinion that the television debates helped Bill Clinton to enter the White House in 1992. There are other interesting facts and figures that reflect the importance of TV debates. According to the Times-Mirror survey in the USA, the 1992 TV debates allowed almost 70 percent of voters to decide on «their» candidate.

In Ukraine the first case of TV debates occurred in early 1990s. Then, the open and heated debate was held live between chief ideologist of the Communist Party of Ukraine Leonid Kravchuk and philosopher Myroslav Popovych on behalf of the Ukrainian People's Rukh. Then the debates had substantial public response and helped Kravchuk to become what he became, and also played a significant role in the development of the Rukh. However, the circumstances have changed. Since those «old» (compared to Ukraine's 11-year statehood) days direct, unedited television discussions disappeared from the Ukrainian media space. The experience of debates in the 1997-1998 campaign, «5x5», broadcast by the Studio 1+1 was not exactly the most successful in the context of transparency and complete representation of parties. The idea of the TV debates in the run-up to the 1999 presidential election in the Epicenter political talk show was not implemented in full.

The issue of running TV debates is back on the agenda today, when the parliamentary campaign is about to start. The suspicion that no fair debates will be held with representation of all willing parties resulted in a heated «debates about debates» and even the adoption of a special law.

It is generally known that television plays a crucial role in shaping likes and dislikes of the electorate. In Ukraine, the resource for making such influence is vast: there are almost 9,000 registered television and radio broadcasters, only 27 of which are officially state-owned.

According to a 1997 public opinion poll by Socis-Gallup, almost 62 percent of Ukrainian eligible voters got political information from television, 38 percent got it from the radio, and only about 18 percent from the print media. To date the proportion has not changed much.

Ukraine is not the only post-Soviet state that faces the TV debate dilemma. Noteworthy, the «debates about debates» occur in the states in which political regimes are relatively more liberal compared to the neighboring regimes. For instance, in Central Asia «debates about debates» took place during the 1999 presidential election campaign in Kirgizstan, seen almost as the stronghold of democracy in that region. In our neighboring country of Belarus the issue of the need to hold live TV debates was not even raised.

In the «grey zones» of democracy, TV debates are not just special information sources but a kind of election techniques. Yet, the debates in the «to have or not to have» format highlight a real socio-political problem – the lack of free and direct access to information, rather than disguised or even overt interpretations by «mediators», «commentators» and others who are willing to interpret information going from politicians to voters. Discussions about the need to have television debates demonstrate the lack of adequate unbiased information and the problem of equality of access to the media.

The scope of the problem can be demonstrated by the fact that the International Renaissance Foundation, a major grant-making organization of the Soros network, failed to find a national TV broadcaster that would accept a grant for broadcasting the election debates on the conditions of equal access to the debates for all parties and blocks that would officially run for parliament, including the opposition. Hence, the TV companies could not guarantee that the debates would be inclusive and genuine, not just refined talks in the air with «approved» candidates and party leaders.

Presumably, the quality of television debates, the observance of the equal access principle, the absence of political self-censorship and censorship in the media is proportional to the level of democracy of an election. On the other hand, the higher are the indicators of «equal access» of candidates, the higher is the interest of participants of the electoral process. Voters' interest to the debates is also a kind of an indicator of both transparency of the election process and efficiency of organization of the TV debates. The interest of voters, not just politicians, in having the TV debates also demonstrates not only the level of interest to the debates as such, but also to the political process in general and the voters' involvement in the process of political communication. Regrettably, so far the involvement of the Ukrainian society in the political communication process has been negligible.

To a large extent, the problem is highlighted by the «debates about the debates», or rather, almost complete lack of any discussion in the society on the matter. Instead, there is a political discussion, as the matter itself becomes increasingly politicized.

On December 13, 2001, the parliament had its say on the issue of TV debates and adopted the bill «On Mandatory Television Debates During Election Campaigns for Elections of President of Ukraine and Elections of People's Deputies of Ukraine» straight after the first reading. The bill was supported by 263 votes. The factions that voted to reject the bill were the Trudova Ukraina, the SDPU(o), the Regions of Ukraine, the People's Democratic Party and the Democratic Union.

The new law set the rules for holding pre-election TV debates between presidential candidates, leaders of political parties and blocks, and individual candidates. The principles of TV debates, outlined in the new law, include «mandatory participation» and «equal conditions for all participants of the election process», «glasnost and transparency», «freedom of campaigning», and unbiased attitude to candidates who hold high-ranking official positions by state authorities, local self-governance bodies and civil servants. Meanwhile, the principle of «mandatory participation» does not match the principle of «equal opportunities». By law and reason, every candidate or party has the right to choose his or her own methods of campaigning. However, Article 7, paragraph 2 clearly states that «a presidential candidate, a leader of party (block) [and] a majoritarian candidate who refuses to take part in all or some TV debates is disqualified from the list of candidates and removed from the race.» Meanwhile, neither the Constitution or the election law specifies participation in the debate as a prerequisite for membership of the parliament. The «know-how», though, looks rather dubious in the context of candidates' and parties' rights.

The law stipulates that the debates are a necessary prerequisite (!) for the election campaign and that in order to be valid the debates should be live and involve representatives of two parties (blocks) with the observance of the equal opportunity rules outlined in the law. Remarkably, the law does not explicitly apply only to state-owned or community media, which may result in extending it to the private media as well. The politicians who must take part in the debates, according to the law, include all presidential candidates, leaders of all parties and blocks participating in the election, and all (!) majoritarian candidates.

Some provisions of the law look like sources of overt pressure on the media. According to the law, «organization and holding of television debates, envisaged by this law, as well as their financial, staff, material and technical support is performed at the expense of television and radio broadcasters <...> and is one of key licensing conditions». If the law applied to state-owned and communal media, the provision could be seen as logical, but not in the case of private media. The law obliges private broadcasters to organize and finance debates even though the debates may not fit into the general concept of the channel and its development plans. Curiously, what entertainment and music channels like the MTV are supposed to do? The law also provides that no commercial ads can interrupt the multi-hour debates. While the election law contains such a requirement on the state-owned and community media, it does not apply to commercial broadcasters.

Furthermore, if the law is to be observed in full, television debates are likely to be a lengthy process. According to

the law, no more than two parties or blocks, represented by their leaders, can take part in the debates simultaneously, and a debate can feature no more than four majoritarian candidates for the same constituency. The requirement of the law is to hold as many series of debates as to ensure that each party, block and majoritarian candidate met in the debates every of his/her/its competitors. For instance, 30 parties and blocks took part in the 1998 race. How many live debates would have had to occur? To calculate the actual number of such debates, one would need to spend some time on one's maths...

According to the law, the schedule of live debates is made by state-owned and communal broadcasters themselves through casting lots, but no debates broadcast by national channels and the channels that cover at least 30 percent of Ukraine's territory, can overlap. Moreover, within 50 days before the polling day, when the officially allowed campaign in the media is to take place, leaders of parties and blocks and majoritarian candidates will be actually forced to spend too much of their time debating live with their competitors. Some may be willing to change the schedule, claiming they are ill (which is practically the only way how the debates can be postponed), but then, again, it's a question how broadcasters manage to re-schedule their events to make sure all participants of the race are represented in the debates – otherwise they may be facing a risk of accusations and sanctions that may cost them their licenses.

Even a casual glance at the law raises doubt about its efficacy and advisability. Obviously, it will be vetoed by the president, and, probably, the veto will not be overcome. Meanwhile, there is a real danger that the veto will mean that genuine fair debates between all political leaders and candidates who wish to take part in them will not occur. It is no secret that the problem is not the debates per se, but the issue of granting equal opportunity of access to the media for different political forces. The bill was lobbied by the group of Yulia Tymoshenko, an opposition politician who has real problem getting access to the media. The question is whether the problem can be solved by the adoption of the law.